Perceptions of Parenting: Individual Differences and the Effect of Community

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Abstract:

Neighborhood norms are an important determinant of beliefs and attitudes about parenting, and measuring changes in community norms is an important component of evaluating community-based programs for improving child outcomes. The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not a survey of community residents' perceptions of parenting could be used to measure community parenting norms and whether these perceptions differed by individual or community characteristics. Two community surveys with 870 and 914 respondents, respectively, were conducted in 3 low-income neighborhoods. Results indicated that perceptions of parenting could be measured reliably at the community level although it is important to consider the presence of multiple norms when using such measures. Furthermore, differences in perceptions of parenting associated with individual characteristics were markedly decreased when neighborhood characteristics were considered, suggesting that the association of individual characteristics with perceptions of parenting is confounded by neighborhood characteristics.

Keywords: parenting; norms; measures; neighborhood.

Article:

The parental relationship is the most salient feature of the social world of the young child, and the impact of the parent–child relationship on a child's cognitive and emotional development has been the subject of extensive research (see e.g., Bakeman & Brown, 1980; Baumrind, 1971; Beckwith, 1984; Bee et al., 1982; Blehar, Lieberman, & Ainsworth,1977; Bradley et al., 1989). At the same time, there has been a resurgence in efforts to identify how neighborhood characteristics affect the health and well-being of individual residents (see e.g., Caughy, O'Campo, & Brodsky, 1999). Neighborhood characteristics have been related to differences in parenting strategies (Cotterell, 1986) as well as child and adolescent outcomes (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Coulton, Korbin, Su & Chow, 1995; Coulton & Pandey, 1992; Crane, 1991; Garbarino & Sherman, 1980; Kupersmidt, Griesler, de Rosier, Patterson, & Davis, 1995; Peeples & Loeber, 1994; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Simcha-Fagan & Schwartz, 1986). There are a variety of mechanisms by which neighborhood characteristics may affect parenting and child development outcomes. One of the most direct effects of neighborhoods on parenting may be through the socializing effect of normative patterns of child-rearing. To the extent that normative beliefs and behaviors about parenting exist in a neighborhood, parents may adopt parenting strategies that are consistent with neighborhood norms.

During the 1990s, there has been a renewed interest in community and neighborhood-based approaches to dealing with poverty and related social problems, particularly in urban settings. Community-based approaches are by no means new and can be traced from the late nineteenth century through the end of the twentieth century (Halpern, 1996). The most recent approaches to dealing with specific urban health and social issues have framed the problems ecologically and have attempted to harness comprehensive community resources to bear

upon the problems. The types of initiatives that have emerged are referred to in the literature and in practice as "community building" approaches. Problems of concern, be they crime, delinquency, infant mortality, or child abuse and neglect are seen in relation to the contexts in which they occur, including families, neighborhoods, and cities. Community building approaches attempt to be comprehensive in defining what needs to be changed to make neighborhoods and communities more conducive to nurturing and supporting healthy individuals and families (Coulton, 1996). In relation to programs concerned with outcomes for children, the emphasis on "community building" stands in contrast to earlier efforts that focused almost exclusively on families without regard to the neighborhoods and communities in which they resided (Coulton, 1996). One such program was a major federally funded initiative, the Healthy Start Infant Mortality Prevention Demonstration Program, which was funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration and which sought to reduce infant mortality by 50% in the highest risk cities and regions of the country through the provision of comprehensive services to women and their children in a community-based context. Other initiatives that can be viewed within this overall approach to community building include initiatives sponsored by the Enterprise Foundation (including Community Building in Partnership in Baltimore) and the federally sponsored "empowerment zones." A recent report on community building published by the Urban Institute describes the emergence of community building during the 1990s and describes key elements of the approach (Kingsley, McNeely, & Gibson, 1998), including the following: reinforcing values that build social and human capital; community driven with broad resident participation; comprehensive and strategic; asset based; tailored to local conditions; collaborative; and oriented toward eliminating barriers and racism.

An important component of evaluating neighborhood-based interventions is measuring changes in neighborhood-level characteristics that are important for families and children. There have been a few attempts to assess neighborhood characteristics important for families and children. Garbarino and Sherman (1980) and Garbarino and Kostelny (1992) utilized a qualitative approach to interviewing families and community "expert informants" to compare the neighborhood environments of economically impoverished neighborhoods that differed in their risk of child maltreatment. Coulton, Korbin, and Su (1996) reported results of a survey approach to assessing aspects of the neighborhood environment relevant to families of young children. Their survey involved identifying a stratified random sample of households that included young children living in 1 of 16 residential block groups in Cleveland. Questionnaire topics included availability of resources and services; participation in neighborhood activities; social interaction; willingness to intervene with children; neighborhood quality, stability, and disorder; fear of violence, and neighborhood identity. The purpose of the study was to determine if these aspects of the neighborhood environment could be reliably measured at the community level by aggregating responses of individual residents. Results indicated that these aspects of the neighborhood environment could be measured reliably at the community level except in the case of neighborhood social interaction and the willingness to intervene with children. The authors suggested a number of reasons why neighborhood social interaction and willingness to intervene with children could not be measured reliably at the community level. It may be that perceptions of these aspects of a neighborhood are much more influenced by personal characteristics. For example, one of the questions comprising the neighborhood social interaction measure asks respondents to agree or disagree on a 10-point likert scale with the statement "People in my neighborhood visit with one another in their home." If the respondent himself is not a very social person who has rarely or never visited with his neighbors, he may respond to that question consistent with his own experience rather than in reference to neighborhood social interaction patterns as a whole. A similar situation may exist for the items related to willingness to intervene with children in the neighborhood, confounding perceptions of willingness in the neighborhood as a whole with personal willingness of the respondent. However, it is important that the results of Coulton et al. (1996) be replicated before conclusions can be drawn regarding our ability to measure these aspects of neighborhoods reliably.

The work of Coulton et al. (1996) represents one of the first attempts to systematically assess aspects of the neighborhood environment that are important for families with young children. Their survey method represents a cost effective approach that should be routinely incorporated into evaluations of community-based interventions. However, Coulton's approach is incomplete because it did not include an assessment of

neighborhood norms of parenting behaviors. Neighborhood norms are an important determinant of an individual's beliefs and attitudes about parenting (Cohen, 1981 as cited by Okagaki & Divecha,1993). If neighborhood norms of child-rearing represent an important mediator of parenting behaviors, then measuring changes in neighborhood norms represents an important component of evaluating neighborhood-based programs for improving child health and development outcomes.

One of the methodological challenges of this endeavor is establishing criteria for defining a "norm". A community norm is typically defined as a shared expectation of how people should behave within certain roles or situations. The idea of a norm has traditionally implied the evaluation of "should" or "should not" toward behaviors (Labovitz & Hagedorn, 1973). Norms have been described as "cultural rules" or "internalized structures" that influence the behaviors of individuals (D'Andrade, 1995, p. 147). The problem with this definition is that some norms that influence behavior are not learned by explicit verbal rules, but by the routinization of behaviors over time. This routinization creates mental schema that influence the choices and behaviors of individuals (D'Andrade, 1995). Another complication regarding the measurement of norms is that norms, as well as culture, are not unified and static. Referring to the contributions made by Quinn and Strauss (n.d.), D'Andrade notes that culture is "partially shared and partially diverse, partially contested and partially accepted, partially changing and partially permanent" (p. 147).

Traditionally, norms have been studied using ethnographic methods that involve in-depth study of a group's beliefs and behavior patterns. Such an exhaustive approach is not feasible for assessing neighborhood norms as part of evaluating the impact of a neighborhood-based initiative. We propose that another approach to measuring neighborhood parenting norms is to survey neighborhood residents about their perceptions of the parenting strategies adopted by parents in the neighborhood.

There are other methodological challenges to studying norms in a neighborhood context. Past efforts to identify neighborhood norms have assumed that a single norm was present, and methods that were used were designed to reject the null hypothesis that there was not a single community norm (Buckner, 1988; Coulton et al., 1996). However, these methods fail to acknowledge that there may be more than a single norm present for the attitude, belief, or behavior of interest. As past research has shown that neighborhoods are not homogeneous settings (Caughy, O'Campo, & Brodsky, 1999), a single homogeneous norm may not exist. In such cases, other methods are necessary to determine if multiple norms are present.

This lack of homogeneity within communities has an impact on the language used to describe settings. Taken as a whole, the research on the role of setting characteristics does not use the terms neighborhood and community in uniform ways. For some, neighborhood is a smaller physical unit of a community (e.g., the community norm research); for others, multiple relational or attitudinal subcommunities exist within a physical neighborhood (e.g., Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986), and for others the terms neighborhood and community are used interchangeably (Coulton et al., 1996). In this paper, we have used community as a generic term for those aggregate effects above the level of the individual. In addition, in discussing the heterogeneity within neighborhoods, we also use community as a subcategory of a physical neighborhood. When we are talking about a specific physical setting, we use the term neighborhood.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not a survey of neighborhood residents' perceptions of parenting in the neighborhood can be used to measure neighborhood parenting norms. A second purpose of this study was to determine if these perceptions of parenting differ systematically by individual or neighborhood characteristics or both.

METHOD

Data Collection Methods

Data for this study were drawn from two surveys conducted as part of the evaluation of the Baltimore City Healthy Start infant mortality prevention project. One purpose of the evaluation was to determine if Healthy

Start contributed to a process of community change. The neighborhood surveys were designed to measure whether changes occurred at the neighborhood level with regard to attitudes about pregnancy, infant health, and child rearing. The first neighborhood survey was conducted in the spring of 1994 during the early stages of the program, and the second survey was conducted during the summer of 1996.

Although the content of the surveys differed slightly, the data collection methods were identical. Each survey was conducted in the three target evaluation neighborhoods, two neighborhoods served by the program and a third comparison neighborhood. Each target neighborhood was defined as 6–8 contiguous census tracts (a map displaying the target neighborhoods is displayed in Fig. 1). The census tracts were further divided into a total of 79 census block groups representing the smaller residential geographies used here as proxies for neighborhoods. Respondents for the survey were identified using a stratified random sample of households. The goal of each survey was to complete a total of 900 interviews, 300 in each of the target neighborhoods. For each of the 79 census block groups included in the three areas, a random sample of hundred blocks was drawn and weighted by the population density of the block group.[2] A team of seven community residents was hired and trained in the administration of the survey instrument and the implementation of the sampling procedures. Interviewers approached each study block and identified the first house to canvas based on which house number's last digit matched a random number selected for that day. If a resident between the ages of 18 and 65 was home, the interviewer read the disclosure statement and requested consent for participation. If no one was home, a flyer was left, and the house was recanvassed on two additional occasions. These additional contact attempts were made on different days of the week and at different times of the day in order to maximize the possibility of reaching an eligible respondent. If more than one eligible individual was home, the interviewer used a random process to select the respondent. Interviews lasted 15–20 min, and respondents received $5 as a token of appreciation for their time. A total of 870 interviews were conducted during the first community survey, and 914 surveys were conducted during the second community survey.

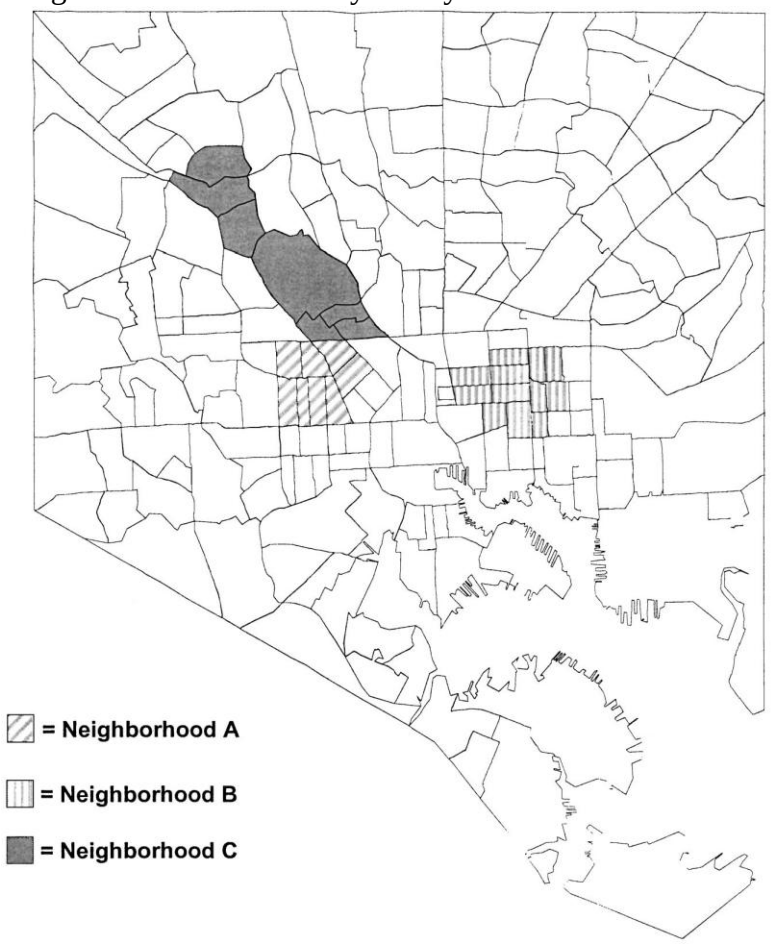

Fig. 1. Community survey target neighborhoods.

Preliminary Factor Analysis of Parenting Measures

The analyses reported here focus on three different sets of questions that were included in the surveys, one from Survey 1 and two from Survey 2.

Table I. Scale Items About Most Mothers and Most Fathers in the Neighborhood, Survey 1

Most mothers in the neighborhood…	Most fathers in the neighborhood…
Read to their children	Read to their children
Play with their children	Play with their children
Take their children to church	Take their children to church
Love their children	Love their children
Breastfeed	Provide for their children
Hug their children	Spend time with their children
Talk to their children	Buy things for their children
Discipline their children	Take their children to the doctor
Listen to their children	Hug their children
Are good mothers	Talk to their children
Are responsible	Discipline their children
Take their children for shots	Listen to their children
Feed their children well	Are good fathers
Have enough money	Are responsible
Have adequate housing	Have adequate housing
Have child care	Don't parent[a]
Buy things for their children[a]	Beat their children[a]
Are mean[a]	Are mean fathers[a]
Are on social service checks[a]	
Receive WIC[a]	
Beat their children[a]	
Let children play outside[a]	

Note: Internal reliability of the most mothers scale is .94 and the internal reliability of the most fathers scale is .95.

[a]These items were dropped from the scale because of low measures of sampling adequacy, low communalities, low intercorrelations'or a combination of these.

The purpose of each set of questions was to assess the respondent's perception of parenting practices in the neighborhood. Survey 1 included a set of questions in which respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements about the parenting characteristics and behaviors of most mothers and most fathers in their neighborhoods. The specific items included in the scale (see Table I) were derived from focus groups about parenting with men and women in the target communities (Aronson, unpublished). Focus group participants discussed broad themes related to parenting in their neighborhood, including the following: what it means to be a parent; the tasks of being a parent; the tasks of mothers and fathers; characteristics of mothers and fathers; types of parents; and challenges of being a parent in this neighborhood. The survey items pertaining to the characteristics and behaviors of "most mothers" and "most fathers" in the neighborhood were drawn from the discussions on tasks and characteristics of mothers and fathers.

Principal axis factoring was used to determine if the most mothers/most fathers items reflected more than one underlying construct. The most mothers items were factored separately from the most fathers items. Based on low measures of sampling adequacy, low communalities, low intercorrelations or a combination of these, six items were dropped from the most mothers items (play outside, are mean, receive social service checks, receive WIC, buy things, and beat), and three items were dropped from the most fathers items (don't parent, beat, and are mean). Based on an inspection of the scree plots, a single factor was extracted from the most mothers items, and a single factor was extracted from the most fathers items. The internal reliabilities for the scales were .94 and .95, respectively. Higher scores on each scale indicate that the respondent perceived parents in the neighborhood to be more involved in parenting tasks.

Survey 2 included two sets of questions regarding successful parenting. The first set of 12 questions asked respondents what resources are necessary for successful parenting in their neighborhood. The second set of questions asked respondents if they knew parents in their neighborhood who they considered good or successful parents and to agree or disagree with statements regarding what actions or outcomes make a person a successful parent (see Table II for specific items). The items in these questions were influenced by focus group discussions

regarding types of parents and challenges of parenting in this neighborhood, as well as research by one of the authors on parenting resilience in similar neighborhoods in Washington, DC (Brodsky, 1999). The questions represent an attempt to better understand and evaluate the range of opinions generated in focus groups regarding how one can assess parenting performance and the supports needed to perform well as a parent in these particular settings. Both sets of questions, Parenting Resources and Successful Parenting, were factor analyzed using principal axis factoring. Although varimax rotation resulted in a two factor solution for the Parenting Resources items, the resulting factors did not represent conceptually different constructs. Therefore, the Parenting Resources were considered as a single scale, and the internal consistency of the total 12-item scale was .84. Higher scores on the Parenting Resources Scale indicated that respondents considered a greater variety of resources to be important for successful parenting.

When the Successful Parenting questions were factor analyzed, varimax rotation resulted in a two factor solution. The first factor was called Outcomes because it consisted of externally judged outcomes of successful parenting and had an internal consistency of .86. The second factor was named Effort and consisted of three items relating to what successful parents do, rather than the outcomes of successful parenting. This factor had an internal consistency of .85. One of the items in the Effort factor, "Their children feel loved," may appear at first glance to be conceptually inconsistent with the other items in the factor. Although the item "Their children feel loved" could be seen as a type of parenting outcome, it is not a concrete, outwardly manifest outcome like the other outcome items. Trying, spending time, and 'making' a child feel loved can all be seen as parenting goals that do not have specifically defined manifest outcomes for children.

Table II. Scale Items for Parenting Resources and Characteristics of Successful Parents, Survey 2

"How important is _____ to being a good parent in your neighborhood?"
Factor 1 ($\alpha = .81$)
Support of your church/temple/mosque
Other adults who help in the home
Involvement of children's father
Being independent
A job
Spirituality/faith
Being happy as a parent
Factor 2 ($\alpha = .70$)
Not being on welfare
An education
Money
Not using alcohol
A safe neighborhood
"A person is a good or successful parent if "
Factor 1: Outcomes ($\alpha = .86$)
Their children stay out of trouble in school
Their children do not get into trouble with the law
Their children do not carry or use weapons
Their children have values/morals
Their children have respect for elders
Their children have spirituality/religion
Their children help others
Their children have lots of friends in the neighborhood
Others in the neighborhood think of them as a good parent
Factor 2: Effort ($\alpha = .85$)
Their children feel loved
They keep trying to do better as parents and as a family
They spend time talking and doing things with their children

Variables

In addition to the measures of parenting perceptions, a number of variables were available to characterize the individuals in the two survey samples. Individual-level variables were collected as a part of the survey and included respondent gender, age, employment status, educational attainment (Survey 2 only), length of residence in the neighborhood, current parenting status, self-reported health status, acquaintance with successful

parents (Survey 2 only), and church attendance (Survey 2 only). The distributions of these characteristics for the two survey samples are displayed in Table III.

Table III. Characteristics of Survey Respondents for two Community-Based Surveys

Characteristic	*N*%	
	Survey 1 (Total $N = 870$)	Survey 2 (Total $N = 914$)
Gender[a]		
Men	282 (32.4)	369 (40.4)
Women	566 (65.1)	507 (55.5)
Missing	22 (2.5)	38 (4.2)
Age		
<20 years	36 (4.1)	52 (5.7)
20–29 years	224 (25.7)	181 (19.8)
30–49 years	422 (48.5)	439 (48.0)
50+ years	188 (21.6)	217 (23.7)
Missing	—	25 (2.7)
Employment status		
Full- or part-time	434 (49.9)	419 (45.8)
Unemployed	217 (24.9)	179 (19.6)
Not in job market	184 (21.1)	253 (27.7)
Missing	35 (4.0)	63 (6.9)
Educational attainment		
Less than high school	—	335 (36.7)
High school	—	343 (37.5)
More than high school	—	226 (24.7)
Missing		63 (6.9)
Length of residence		
<1 year	78 (9.0)	45 (4.9)
1–5 years	331 (38.0)	319 (34.9)
>5 years	457 (52.5)	546 (59.7)
Missing	4 (.5)	4 (0.4)
Current parent of young child		
No	536 (61.6)	455 (49.8)
Yes	322 (37.0)	457 (50.0)
Missing	12 (1.4)	1 (0.2)
Reported health status		
Excellent	33 (3.8)	37 (4.0)
Very good	135 (15.5)	175 (19.1)
Good	232 (26.7)	195 (21.3)
Fair	294 (33.8)	322 (35.2)
Poor	155 (17.8)	176 (19.3)
Don't know	1 (.1)	—
Missing	20 (2.3)	9 (1.0)
Knows successful parents		
No	—	210 (23.0)
Yes	—	670 (73.3)
Don't know	—	13 (1.4)
Missing	—	21 (2.3)
Attends church regularly		
No	—	426 (46.6)
Yes	—	487 (53.3)
Missing	—	1 (0.1)

[a]Respondent gender was determined by observation. For a small percentage of cases, gender was uncertain.

Table IV. Characteristics of Three Low Income Neighborhoods in Baltimore

Variable	Mean	*SD*
Per capita income	$8,876	$4,494.70
Median housing value	$34,148	$17,632
Unemployment rate	0.15	0.08
Proportion home owners	0.27	0.15
Population density (persons per square mile)	25.34	10.92
Male/female ratio	0.84	0.10
Proportion African-American	0.96	0.11
Crime density (1993) (crimes per square mile)	4.14	1.82

Note: Except where noted, all data were derived from the 1990 census.

Data for neighborhood-level variables were obtained from routinely collected sources including the census and local governmental organizations.

Data were linked to the survey responses using census tract and census block group number. Neighborhood level variables included a variety of neighborhood economic, demographic, and social characteristics. The specific variables used and the means and standard deviations for the study neighborhoods are displayed in Table IV. The neighborhoods included in the study were relatively economically impoverished and primarily African American in their racial composition. The predominance of low-income neighborhoods is consistent with the focus of the Healthy Start program.

Analysis Methods

One of the objectives of this study was to determine if perceptions of parenting in a neighborhood could be characterized as a community norm. Two approaches were used to determine if the parenting measures represented norms for the neighborhoods in the study, the first method to determine if a single norm was present and the second to determine if multiple norms were present. To test the hypothesis that a single norm was present, we used the methods of O'Brien (1990). O'Brien (1990) presents a method for calculating a "generalizability coefficient" to determine the reliability of aggregating individual perceptions to the neighborhood level which was used by Coulton et al. (1996) in their study of neighborhood measures. An aggregate measure will be more reliable if individual respondents from the same neighborhood have responses that are more similar than compared to respondents living in different neighborhoods. O'Brien's generalizability coefficient compares the mean squares between neighborhoods and the mean squares within neighborhoods, and if the variance between neighborhoods is large relative to the variance within neighborhoods, the aggregate reliability will be high. A high generalizability coefficient indicates that the construct of interest can be measured reliably by asking questions of individual neighborhood residents.

However, the determination of a community norm is complicated by the fact that more than one predominant norm may be present in the community. In such a situation, the generalizability coefficient would be relatively low. To address this issue, we undertook consensus analysis as the next step in examining whether the parenting measures represented multiple norms in the study neighborhoods. Using a computer software package called ANTHROPAC, consensus analysis allows one to assess the amount of agreement between respondents on a set of questions (Romney et al., 1986; Romney, Batchelder, & Weller, 1987). If the agreement is high, it is said that there is consensus, and the common response set reflects "shared cultural information". In this aspect, consensus analysis is very similar to the generalizability coefficient described above. However, consensus analysis allows one to go one step further. If the overall consensus is low, ANTHROPAC will allow one to partition the respondents into two or more subsets of respondents who are more homogeneous in their answers. If consensus can be demonstrated within these subsets of respondents, it is said that multiple norms exist for the domain of interest.

The second purpose of this study was to examine how perceptions of parenting differed by individual and community characteristics. After determining whether these measures represented community norms, bivariate associations between individual characteristics and the parenting perceptions measures were assessed using a X2 statistic. For multivariate analyses of individual and neighborhood differences in parenting perceptions, we utilized the multilevel modeling software MLn (Goldstein, 1995). Because survey respondents are clustered within 79 neighborhoods, ordinary least squares regression estimation methods are not appropriate. Ordinary regression techniques are inappropriate when several study participants are from the same neighborhood because they fail to account for the correlation between these observations. Recent advances in multilevel statistical methods offer an opportunity to more closely approximate an ecosystem model. Special statistical packages such as MLn allow one to incorporate both individual-level variables as well as contextual variables in the same explanatory model. In addition, these methods allow one to estimate both direct and indirect effects of contextual variables on the outcome of interest.

RESULTS

Reliability Analysis of Parent Perception Measures

Aggregate reliability coefficients were calculated for each of the four parenting perceptions measures. For the Most Mothers scale, the aggregate reliability was .59, and for the Most Fathers scale, the aggregate reliability was .50. For the Parenting Resources scale, the aggregate reliability was —.15.
For the Successful Parents scale, the aggregate reliability was —.06. Although O'Brien (1990) does not propose specific cutoff values for determining adequate reliability, Coulton et al. (1996) reported on aggregate-level measures with reliabilities between .43 and .84 as having moderate to good reliability. The Most Mothers and Most Fathers scales appear to have adequate reliability as compared with the results reported by Coulton et al. (1996). However, the Parenting Resources and Successful Parenting scales had very low aggregate reliability, despite having adequate individual reliability. This indicates that within the same neighborhood, there is considerable variability with regards to the perceptions of the resources needed for parenting as well as the characteristics of successful parents.

Because the characteristics of Successful Parents and the Parenting Resources measures did not have adequate aggregate reliability, these measures were subjected to consensus analysis. A consensus analysis of the Parenting Resources measures identified two predominant norms present in the sample. The 821 cases in Norm Group 1 identified all of the resources listed as being very important, whereas the 94 cases in Norm Group 2 identified these resources as important rather than very important.

A consensus analysis of the Successful Parenting measure also indicated that there were two predominant norms for this measure. The 858 cases in Norm Group 1 believed that successful parents were identified not only by their efforts but also by the positive outcomes of their children. In contrast, the 58 cases in Norm Group 2 believed that successful parents were identified only by the amount of effort they put into parenting and not by the outcomes of their children.

Individual Differences in Perceptions of Community Parenting

Bivariate associations between individual characteristics and perceptions of parenting are displayed in Tables V and VI. For the Most Mothers scale, individuals who were employed perceived mothers in their community to be more involved in parenting tasks, and individuals who had lived in the neighborhood for more than 1 year perceived mothers in their community to be more involved in parenting. In contrast, for the Most Fathers scale, employed individuals perceived fathers in their community to be less involved in parenting.3 In addition, female respondents perceived fathers in their neighborhoods to be significantly less involved in parenting.

Individuals who were included in Norm Group 2 for the Characteristics of Successful Parents, those who believed that successful parenting was determined by parenting effort and not by their children's outcomes, were slightly more likely to have more than a high school degree and were less likely to know successful parents. Individuals who were included in Norm Group 2 for the Parenting Resources measure, those who believed that these resources were important rather than very important, were more likely to be men, less likely to have completed more than a high school degree, less likely to be currently parenting, less likely to know successful parents, and less likely to attend church regularly.

Multivariate Analyses of Perceptions of Parenting

The results for multilevel regression analyses of the perceptions measures are displayed in Tables VII and VIII. For all of the measures, differences associated with individual characteristics are markedly decreased when neighborhood characteristics are included in the model, suggesting that the association of individual characteristics with perceptions of parenting is confounded by neighborhood characteristics. In the final model for the Most Mothers scale, being employed was associated with perceptions of greater parenting involvement of mothers in the community. No other individual characteristics were associated with perceptions of mothers in the community. Two neighborhood characteristics were related to differences in perceptions of parenting

involvement of mothers. Respondents who lived in neighborhoods with higher median housing values and a greater male to female ratio reported greater involvement of mothers in parenting.

Table V. Bivariate Associations Between Perceptions of Most Mothers and Most Fathers in the Neighborhood With Individual Characteristics

Individual characteristic	Perceptions of parents in the neighborhood	
	Most mothers	Most fathers
Gender		
Men	9.53	6.74**
Women	9.26	5.60**
Age		
<20 years	9.75	6.12
20–29 years	9.39	5.72
30–49 years	9.26	5.83
50+ years	9.37	6.53
Employment		
Full time or part time	9.89**	6.17*
Unemployed	8.25**	5.05*
Not in job market	8.97**	6.30*
Length of residence		
<1 year	9.26*	5.57†
1–5 years	9.97*	6.52†
>5 years	9.90*	5.57†
Currently parenting		
No	8.90	6.27
Yes	9.47	5.79
Health status		
Excellent	7.05	4.54†
Very good	9.84	7.15†
Good	9.29	5.47†
Fair	9.47	6.10†
Poor	8.84	5.59†

† $p < .10$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

Table VI. Parenting Resources and Successful Parenting Norm Group Differences in Individual Characteristics

Individual characteristic	*N*%			
	Parenting resources norm group		Successful parenting norm group	
	Group 1 (Total $N = 821$)	Group 2 (Total $N = 94$)	Group 1 (Total $N = 858$)	Group 2 (Total $N = 58$)
Gender				
Male	322 (41.1)	47 (51.1)†	351 (42.8)	17 (33.3)
Female	462 (58.9)	45 (48.9)†	470 (57.2)	34 (66.7)
Age				
<20 years	47 (5.9)	5 (5.6)	49 (5.9)	3 (5.8)
20–29 years	156 (19.5)	25 (27.8)	166 (19.9)	13 (25.0)
30–49 years	403 (50.4)	36 (40.0)	415 (49.8)	24 (46.2)
50+ years	193 (54.2)	24 (26.7)	203 (24.4)	12 (23.1)
Employment				
Full time or part time	377 (49.3)	42 (48.8)	396 (49.6)	22 (44.9)
Unemployed	157 (20.5)	22 (25.6)	169 (21.2)	9 (18.4)
Not in job market	231 (30.2)	22 (25.6)	234 (29.3)	18 (36.7)
Education				
Less than high school	297 (36.6)	38 (40.9)**	321 (37.9)	13 (24.5)†
High school	299 (36.9)	44 (47.3)**	319 (37.7)	21 (39.6)†
More than high school	215 (26.5)	11 (11.8)**	207 (24.4)	19 (35.8)†
Length of residence				
<1 year	40 (4.9)	5 (5.3)	43 (5.0)	2 (3.8)
1–5 years	278 (34.1)	41 (43.6)	303 (35.5)	15 (28.3)
>5 years	498 (61.0)	48 (51.1)	507 (59.4)	36 (67.9)
Currently parenting				
No	397 (48.5)	58 (62.4)*	431 (50.4)	22 (40.7)
Yes	422 (51.5)	35 (37.6)*	424 (49.6)	32 (59.3)
Health status				
Excellent	33 (4.1)	4 (4.3)	35 (4.1)	1 (1.9)
Very good	162 (20.0)	13 (14.0)	164 (19.3)	10 (18.9)
Good	175 (21.6)	20 (21.5)	186 (21.9)	9 (17.0)
Fair	282 (34.7)	40 (43.0)	303 (35.7)	18 (34.0)
Poor	160 (19.7)	16 (17.2)	160 (18.9)	15 (28.3)
Knows resilient parents				
No	181 (22.9)	29 (32.6)*	189 (22.9)	19 (36.5)*
Yes	610 (77.1)	60 (67.4)*	637 (77.1)	33 (63.5)*
Attends church regularly				
No	367 (44.8)	59 (63.4)**	402 (47.0)	22 (40.7)
Yes	453 (55.2)	34 (36.6)**	453 (53.0)	32 (59.3)

† $p < .10$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

Table VII. Multilevel Linear Regression of Community Parenting Measures on Individual and Community Characteristics

	Perceptions of community parenting			
	Most mothers[a]		Most fathers	
	B	SE(B)	B	SE (B)
Intercept	2.94	2.31	4.96	0.98
Individual characteristics				
Gender				
Male[b]	—	—	—	—
Female	—	—	−1.16**	0.44
Employment status				
Full or part-time[b]	—	—	—	—
Unemployed	−1.24*	0.53	—	—
Not in job market	−0.84	0.54	—	—
Neighborhood characteristics				
Per capita income (1000s)	—	—	0.15*	0.07
Median housing value (1000s)	0.05**	0.01	0.04*	0.02
Male/female ratio	7.45**	2.50	—	—
χ^2 for improvement in model fit for addition of neighborhood variables	22.25** (2)		19.62** (2)	

[a] Model adjusted for length of residence; χ^2 for improvement in model fit = 16.06 (1), $p < .01$.
[b] Reference group.
† $p < .10$.
* $p \leq .05$.
** $p < .01$.

Table VIII. Adjusted Odds of Being Member of the Alternate Norm Group for Perceptions of Resources Necessary for Successful Parenting and Characteristics of Successful Parents[a]

	Neighborhood resources for parents		Characteristics of successful parents	
	Odds	95% CI	Odds	95% CI
Individual characteristics				
Educational attainment				
Less than high school[b]	—	—	—	—
High school	1.14	.70–1.86	2.36	1.06–5.26
More than high school	.39	.18–.83	3.49	1.54–7.92
Neighborhood characteristics				
Unemployment rate	—	—	23.57	.65–854.06
Crime density	.78	.65–.93	—	—
χ^2 for improvement in model fit for addition of neighborhood variables	57.98** (1)		6.12* (1)	

[a] Adjusted odds ratios derived from multilevel logistic regression.
[b] Reference group.
* $p \leq .05$.
** $p < .01$.

For the Most Fathers scale, as in the bivariate analyses, women respondents had lower perceptions of parenting involvement of fathers in the neighborhood. As with the perception of parenting by mothers, the perception of parenting involvement by fathers increased with increasing housing value. This was mirrored in a similar increase in perceptions of paternal involvement with increasing per capita income.

Results of the multilevel logistic regression for Parenting Resources are displayed in Table VIII. In this model, the dependent variable is the log odds of being a member of Norm Group 2, those individuals who believed that these resources were important rather than very important. In the final 2 level model, having more than a high school degree and living in a neighborhood characterized by less crime was associated with a higher probability of being a member of Norm Group 2.

The results of the multilevel logistic regression of the Successful Parenting measure are also displayed in Table VIII. In this model, the dependent variable is the log odds of being included in Norm Group 2, those individuals who judged successful parents based on their efforts and not the outcomes of their children. The final 2 level model indicated that individuals with a high school degree or greater were more likely to judge successful parents by their level of effort alone.

DISCUSSION

The importance of understanding and measuring the context of the lives of families and children is increasingly being recognized. Specifically, assessing norms related to parenting beliefs and behaviors is important for research and evaluations concerned with families and children. Assessing norms within neighborhoods is still an evolving activity. In addition to the methods employed in past efforts that assumed the existence of one neighborhood norm, we attempted to determine whether more than one norm of parenting was present.

We successfully developed four parenting measures that concerned perceptions of parenting behavior and available resources in neighborhoods. We found the aggregate reliability to be satisfactory for the scales on perceptions of neighborhood parenting. However, for the other two parenting measures, neighborhood resources and characteristics of successful parents, we found, using methods of consensus analysis, that more than one norm existed within neighborhoods. To our knowledge, this is the first attempt using methods to assess whether more than one norm exists within neighborhoods. Future efforts might use a similar approach when measuring norms.

Our sample was from a low-income neighborhood. Families who live in more middle or upper income neighborhoods may not have the same community influences on perceptions of parenting. For example, middle and upper income families may access more resources and have more social ties outside their own residential neighborhoods. Future studies need to assess the community factors that are relevant for more middle-class families.

Despite the fact that our sample was predominantly low income, there was heterogeneity observed for many of the neighborhood factors. Researchers and program planners should not assume that poor neighborhoods are homogeneous (Caughy et al., 1999). Moreover, a large proportion of our sample reported knowing a successful parent. This too suggests that programs should recognize and draw upon the strengths of community residents.

Our method of asking a sample of adults within neighborhoods about their beliefs concerning parenting behaviors and resources is also important. The success of our method has implications for future efforts attempting to measure neighborhood parenting norms. The time and effort required to survey a sample of all adults in a neighborhood is far less than that required to find and ask only parents of young children. Our strategy of asking adults in the neighborhood about parenting behaviors and resources is a useful strategy for future efforts.

There are some limitations to our approach. The items used in our surveys were derived from focus groups and key informant interviews with residents in the neighborhood in which residents were asked to reflect upon the challenges of parenting in their particular neighborhood. The advantage of this approach is that it ensured that the survey questions developed were relevant to the respondents because they were grounded in the reality of

their own neighborhoods. Other important dimensions of parenting might emerge from focus groups in a different set of neighborhoods.

In contrast to many previous research efforts that tended to focus on individual determinants and correlates of norms, we examined whether norms of parenting beliefs varied, and therefore may be determined by characteristics of a respondent's neighborhood of residence. We found that unemployment rates, crime density, per capita income, media housing value, and male to female ratio were significantly associated with one of the parenting belief norms after adjustment for characteristics of the individual. In addition to these main effects of the community characteristics on perceptions of neighborhood parenting, the magnitude of effects of individual characteristics was attenuated when neighborhood variables were included in the final regression models. Future research, program, and evaluation efforts will be missing important information if neighborhood factors are excluded.

For research, the finding that neighborhood characteristics are associated with perceptions of neighborhood parenting, parenting success, and neighborhood resources for parents means that gathering information on individuals alone will not be adequate to understand and explain observed variation in these scales. Programs would also benefit from explicitly measuring and targeting factors at the neighborhood level if they are to be successful in changing or improving norms related to parenting. Similarly, if evaluation efforts are to capture the reasons for program success or failure, explicit measurement of neighborhood characteristics is essential. In our study, neighborhood factors related to economic well-being and demographic composition were important. These characteristics may comprise an important focus of community-based initiatives to improve the lives of families and children.

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Notes:

[2]A hundred block was defined as both faces of the block containing houses numbered in the same hundred group (e.g., 800–899 Maple Street; 4100–4199 Smith Avenue).

[3]Result of post hoc comparisons indicated that differences in percepations of father's involvement between individual not in the job market and unemployed individuals were not significant.